



HOW JJC'S FIRST PRESIDENT HELPED SHAPE THE
FUTURE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES IN ILLINOIS

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

by Kelly Rohder

Much like the community college he served, Joliet Junior College's first president Elmer Rowley was many things to many people.

For some, he was a respected leader in Illinois higher education legislation. For others, he was a steadfast advocate of progressive college programs in a postwar world. To his five children—who all attended Joliet Junior College—he was a thoughtful, dependable and dedicated father.

Born in 1909, Elmer Wells Rowley spent the beginning years of his childhood on a farm in Montana. His mother had graduated from high school, and his father attended school through the second grade, as was common in the early days, and then stayed home to assist with the farm work, Rowley's son John, said.



Walter Zaida (left) stands with Elmer Rowley and Susan Wood during a JJC registration in the 1960s. (Photo courtesy of Robert Sterling)

After the family moved to Illinois to farm in rural Homer Township in 1918, Rowley went on to attend Lockport High School, most times traveling to school by horse and buggy. After high school, he enrolled in the junior college courses located within Joliet Township High School, which, by 1927, had been settled for over two decades in the high school building on Eastern Avenue in downtown Joliet.

According to Robert Sterling's "Joliet Junior College: A Pictorial History of America's Oldest Public Community College," before his graduation in 1929, Rowley played for the college's first

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baseball team in 1929 and was an actor in the production of the comedy "The Youngest," which perhaps inspired the "Rudolph Valentino" nickname written next to his yearbook photo.

John Rowley said his father graduated with high honors from both JJC and later, the University of Illinois. By 1941, Rowley had earned his master's degree from the University of Chicago in educational administration. Soon after, he spent a year in Hawaii as an exchange teacher, where he was also a foreman on a pineapple plantation.

In 1942, Rowley was back in Joliet and teaching agriculture courses at the high school. By 1947, according to Sterling,

the Board of Education hired him to become dean of the college in response to ballooning postwar enrollments and the need to broaden the college curriculum. Rowley would occupy this role for the next 20 years.

"Elmer was a deep thinker—he contemplated and listened," Walter Zaida, former JJC administrator and Rowley's colleague, said. "He challenged ideas to move them forward and was a hard-nosed negotiator for what he believed in."

Rowley's four daughters, with wife Ruth—Joanne '54; Jean '55; Sue '59; Carol '60—and his son John '66 all attended JJC in the years their father was dean.

"Though it was a pleasure to have him at the college, it always made us work harder so as not to let him down in any way," John Rowley said. "He was very outgoing and personable and enjoyed talking with and helping the students. He seemed to enjoy the long days at the

districts. At the time, the college fell under the jurisdiction of the high school board, and received no funding from the state.

"He lobbied members of the state legislature on important issues, served on national committees of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges (AACJC) and invited educational leaders to come see what JJC was doing academically," John Rowley said. "These visitors would come to our home for dinner and would tell us their stories and share their families with us."

By 1967, Rowley had rallied enough political support in Springfield to make both dreams a reality, and even had a part in co-writing the original legislation which established community college districts in the state of Illinois that still exist today.

It wasn't long after that Rowley, then 58, was selected to become the first president of Joliet Junior College on Aug. 15, 1967. For the next two years, he worked prodigiously to establish the college's new location on Houbolt Road, which opened in September 1969.

Despite the intensity of his work in the later years, Rowley's children vividly remembered their father outside the office: fishing, going out to eat in Chicago's Chinatown, or going ballroom dancing at the O'Henry in Willow Springs.

Rowley retired in 1970 to once again live the life of a farmer on his acreage in Homer Township. He passed away in July 1988.

"His legacy lives on in the lives he touched and in the course of action he took to make the college a true service to the community," John Rowley said. "Not before or since have we witnessed a funeral visitation where so many people attended. It was a true witness to his greatness as a man of the people."



old campus in downtown Joliet."

And long days they were. Only four years into his post as dean of the college, Rowley was tapped in 1951 to concurrently direct the new adult education program. While these roles fully occupied his day-to-day life on campus, his ideas of the future of community colleges in Illinois were percolating.

Rowley ultimately believed two-year institutions should receive financial support from the state like four-year colleges and universities did, and that they should exist within their own